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Review Article

The Politics of Common Sense? Pointers for Pakistan's Political Economy*

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There has been little academic research on Pakistan's political economy for some decades now. Analysis of transition, structural transformations and their resulting impact on the formation of social classes have been missing. Zaidi[1] correctly notes that "Akhtar's is amongst the very few, and most recent contribution that provides a substantive understanding of Pakistan's political economy". Some of the key questions, not answered completely or avoided all together in Akhtar's book, especially those that relate to the subject of religious class/or Islamization and the notion of secularism and secularist elite, have been raised by Akbar S Zaidi in his brilliant review of Akhtar's book. The present review focuses on more substantive theoretical and empirical issues raised by Akhtar's class analysis of Pakistan's political economy.

Framed in a Gramscian tradition, the book presents an account of how Pakistani politics is historically constituted within a model of patron-client relations. The central point of this book is the rise of a counter-hegemonic struggle during the 1970s and its suppression by the state and reconstitution of the "historical bloc" during the Zia regime. The book explains in this vein, "how a particular conception of navigating the everyday" what the author calls the "politics of common sense – has become hegemonic across the length and breadth of Pakistan's society over the past three decades" (p.1). The narrative presented in this book has featured a dialectic of "order" and "change"

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* This article reviews *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan* by A.S. Akhtar (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.200.

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1 S.A. Zaidi, "Class, State and Islam in Pakistan", *Economic and Political Weekly*, LUI 37 (2018): 30.

that is deeply imbedded in the post-colonial structure of power, as it was during the colonial period. For the most part, the state has upheld the imperative of order even while privileging the logic of capital and the inevitable transformation that a deepening capitalism brings with it. The result has been both substantial continuity in that entrenched classes and institutions that have maintained power and privilege, and transformative change as mobility "from below" has allowed newer, nativized segments of society to push their way into an expanded "historical bloc" (p.161).

The book has certain strengths that motivate more critical engagement with some political economy debates, with the potential for generating new ones. First, through the reformulation of Alavi's class model in Gramscian terms, this book offers an institutional analysis which the coercion-consent models were calling for in the heyday of radical politics in Pakistan.[2] Akhtar takes up this task in chapter 2. Evolving institutional dynamics of the state and its sociological composition leads Akhtar to correctly state that "the mythical 'feudal' elite of the British era has been significantly affected by the process of social change, to the point that classical characterizations of Pakistan's political economy are now largely obsolete." (p.31). This has much to do with the changing socioeconomic landscape on the one hand, and the blurring of the state-society binary on the other (p.38). As Akhtar notes, "the Pakistani state is not seen as something distinct from society. Individuals within the state mechanisms are still intricately tied to their human resource networks and their priority must be their network agenda" (p.45). It is here that Akhtar demonstrates more forcefully the recuperation of patronage strategies by traditionally dominant classes in the face of changes both from above and below (p.52). The book should also be credited for the wealth of material it presents and the wide range of issues that it covers across the breath and length of Pakistan's political economy.

However, a broad-brush attempt at threading together the rise of intermediate classes such as traders and religious right, ethno-nationalist movements and patronising role of military in explaining evolving politics of common sense are potentially the book's major weakness. First, the attempts to explain the everyday within the grand narrative rest on anecdotal evidence (pp.145, 152). Akhtar's brilliant account of Pakistan's political economy, therefore, falls prey to "theory

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[2] T. Asad, "Market model, class structure and consent: a reconsideration of Swat Political Organisation", *Man* 7, 1 (1972): 74-94.

effects".[3] Related to this, Akhtar avoids critical engagement with the literature on the politics of patronage in Pakistan.[4] This may also be attributed to the author's political commitment to class analysis (p.18) that he views patronage politics as a dialectical unity in determinist terms and not as a dynamic process. Hence, for Akhtar, the politics of subordinate classes can be most succinctly conceptualized in Marx's terms: "In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will" (p.156). "The subordinate classes undertake political factions within a given structural matrix. They are not, therefore, willingly ceding to social and political exchanges that are cynical and oppressive. They are instead recognizing the real constraints that they face, including the threat of naked coercion, and the possibility of losing what little they have" (pp.156-57).

The book also lacks on a theoretical front. First, Akhtar's account lacks clarity on the processes through which intermediate classes became embedded in the political structure of power. As Javed[5] notes, "this book assigns a causal and ontological primacy to the bureaucracy and even more so to the military in the realm of social action, rather than tracing economic, political, and cultural practices at the societal level. There is no doubt that the military plays an integral role in Pakistan, but production of class power and class distinction often takes place at the micro-level, and increasingly reflects itself through rather than because

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3 P. Bourdieu, and LJD Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 249-50.

4 C. Lindholm, "Contemporary Politics in a Tribal Society: Swat District, NWFP, Pakistan", *Asian Survey* 19, 5 (1979): 485-505; S.M. Lyon, "Power and Patronage in Pakistan" (Phd diss., in Social Anthropology, University of Kent, Canterbury, 2002); S.K. Mohmand, "Patrons, Brothers and Landlords: Competing for the Vote in Rural Pakistan" (DPhil thesis, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Sussex 2011); H. Javed, "Class, Power and Patronage: Landed Elite and Politics in Pakistani Punjab". (Phd diss., Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012) and N.E. Martin, "Class, Patronage and Coercion in the Pakistani Punjab and in Swat", in *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier*, eds., M. Marsden and B. Hopkins (London: Hurst and Co., 2013), 107-18.

5 U. Javed, "Profit, Protest and Power: Bazaar Politics in Urban Pakistan", in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Pakistan*, ed. A. Pande (London: Routledge, reprint version, 2017).

of the state".[6] Second, and therefore, the book is unable to engage constructively with the impacts of twin processes of increased governmentalisation and penetration of capital into existing social formations at the micro level. A vivid illustration of this is the contradiction in the book on the treatment of the attitude of subordinate classes towards politics. Highlighting participation of over 350,000 citizens in the local government elections of 2015, the author suggests, "rhetoric aside, ordinary people retain an interest in the political field" (p.142). Towards the end of the book the author notes dissociation of working class with politics and concludes, "a wide cross-section of society across the ethnic, class and other divides tends to a certain cynicism when it comes to the idea of politics" (p.169). This means, "a substantive political project of and by the subordinate classes is conspicuous by its absence" (ibid). This absence is well taken, but it does not imply no agency for subalterns.

Thanks to the theory effect, this leads to the problem with Akhtar's narrow treatment of Pakistani civil society in Gramscian terms. For Gramsci, civil society does not only support capitalist structures, it also challenges them, and again, not only in the instances of historical moments, but in everyday engagement with the capitalist hegemonic structures.[7] Akhtar's macro political economy perspective on everyday engagement of the poor with politics presents a simplified treatment of subaltern's agency and their role in the civil society and consequently in politics. Doubtless, Pakistani civil society is weak and ineffective, but the model of passive consent fails to explain its changing dynamics and impacts for the macro political economy of Pakistan. Scholars on the politics of civil society are aware that the idea of civil society is inherently political, and inseparable from the state and political forces arising from society, and being political, it is context-dependent.[8] If so, a major political question left unanswered in Akhtar's account is how subnational level effects of everyday engagement of civil society with political aggregate into a national level effect? If everything submerges

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6 Ibid., 7.

7 J. Glassman, "Cracking Hegemony in Thailand: Gramsci, Bourdieu and the Dialectics of Rebellion", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41,1 (2011), 25-46 and M. Burawoy, "For a Sociological Marxism: The Complimentary Convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi" *Political Society 31*, 2 (2003): 197.

8 C.M. Elliott, *Civil Society and Democracy: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

automatically in the historical bloc because of rise to power, as Akhtar would have us believe, his account is less dialectical than reductionist.

Despite these evident theoretical and empirical weaknesses, the book offers a much-needed perspective that makes it a must-read for scholars of political economy, political sociology, and above all, Marxist sociology focused on the state-society-market relations in Pakistan. It also contributes to the scholarship on patronage politics in Pakistan, by remaining on the margins of debate on the two sides of patron-client relations, simple reproduction[9] or increasing power of the poor constituents.[10]

9 N.E. Martin, 107-118.

10 S.M. Lyon, "Power and Patronage in Pakistan".